

# Remarks on the sole fragment of Aristotle's lost *On Prayer*

*Considerações sobre o único fragmento do tratado perdido Da Prece de Aristóteles*

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## Abstract

The only extant fragment of Aristotle's lost treatise *On Prayer* [Περὶ εὐχῆς] is an excerpt from Simplicius' *Commentary on Aristotle's On Heavens* [De caelo] (ad II.12, 292b10; ed. CAG VII; p. 485.19-22 Heiberg). Simplicius' text, however, has been poorly edited for a long time, with several textual problems being spread unconsciously by the majority of the editors of the Aristotelian fragments, and only recently the text began to be properly clarified. The fragment 49 Rose<sup>3</sup> was repeatedly exploited to sustain and to endow with antiquity and authority theological readings with Neoplatonist features, and there is a place where the establishment of the critical text is of the utmost importance for a research in quest for the possibility of understanding God and its intelligibility. This paper discusses the context of Simplicius' testimony, the idiosyncrasies of the textual problems, the structure of the fragment, its lexicon (e.g. ὑπέρ and ἐπέκεινα), and the hermeneutical challenges it poses regarding its authenticity and interpretation within the Aristotelian corpus.

Keywords: ancient greek philosophy, Aristotle, neoplatonism, On Prayer, prayer, Simplicius.

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\* Presentations of preliminary versions of this paper were funded by the Centre of Philosophy, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon; currently I hold an FCT doctoral scholarship (FCT SFRH/BD/130021/2017). I would like to thank Professor Tomás Calvo Martínez (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) for his fruitful remarks on this paper, Professor António Pedro Mesquita (Universidade de Lisboa) for his seminar on the fragments of Aristotle, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.

## 1. THE CONTEXT OF SIMPLICIUS' TESTIMONY

It is within a voluminous commentary by Simplicius that one can find that remarkable text that is, until today, the sole extant fragment of Aristotle's lost treatise *On Prayer* (Περὶ εὐχῆς, *De precatione, De oratione*). This fragment occurs in a specific context whose discussion is worthy to recall, when the Neoplatonist commentator discusses the second book of Aristotle's *On Heavens* (Περὶ οὐρανοῦ, *De caelo*):

τὸ μὲν οὖν ἔχει καὶ μετέχει τοῦ ἀρίστου, τὸ δ' ἀφικνεῖται [ἐγγύς]\* δι' ὀλίγων, τὸ δὲ διὰ πολλῶν, τὸ δ' οὐδ' ἐγχειρεῖ, ἀλλ' ἱκανὸν εἰς τὸ ἐγγύς τοῦ ἐσχάτου ἐλθεῖν.

So one thing has and shares in the best, another reaches it through a few steps, another through many, another does not even try for it, but it is sufficient for it to come close to the ultimate.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage, after investigating the unequivocal unity of the heavens – eternal, spherical, and non-generated nor coming to be – Aristotle focuses on the stars and heavenly bodies, namely their constitutive orders, arrangements and movements, and the nature of these very movements once they are not self-moving. A problem concerning these bodies arises when Aristotle considers the first aporia (II.18): being *per definitionem* immobile, how should not stars be considered simple inert or inanimate bodies, since there are empirical observations that point in a different direction, such as the problems of earth and moon translations. In order to address a problem of considerable technical complexity, Aristotle resorts to a principle of a general nature that will allow to consider the stars as *participants* – the crucial word in this argument – of activity. In the following remarks we will focus on this principle rather than debating the cosmological aporiai.

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1. Arist. *De cael.* II.12, 292b10-14 Moraux. \*ἐγγύς codd., Bekker, Moraux : εὐθὺς Stocks, Allan. ('ἐγγύς' is the consensual *lectio* of all manuscripts; however, the conjectural correction 'εὐθὺς' proposed by Stocks is a valuable reading with a strong philosophical sustainability.) Unless otherwise stated, I will be following Mueller's translation (2005).

The peripatetic philosopher writes that one being – unsurprisingly the best, i.e. the unmoved mover or, in the Neoplatonist understanding, the One – detains and participates of – in itself, completely, and without any kind of activity – the chief good, the best. This is followed by the succeeding different orders that are hierarchically arranged, each one in its own place and according to its own capacity. A natural and understandable explanation of the disposition of the stars in the sky is not restricted to this, and the description is made in terms that allude naturally to the disposition of other physical realities, such as the animal and plant world. What Aristotle had just established is a broader principle of order, with a very general domain, that will be of major importance to a particular reading of the idea of physical and metaphysical ordering of sensible and intelligible realities.

The passage where one finds the fragment can be divided into three parts. The first of them is a paraphrase in which Simplicius recalls the Aristotelian principle:

λέγει οὖν, ὅτι τῶν ὄντων οὔτε τὸ πρῶτον δεῖται πράξεως οὔτε τὸ ἔσχατον, τὸ μὲν ἔσχατον, ὅτι μηδὲ τυγχάνει προσεχῶς τοῦ τέλους, τὸ δὲ πρῶτον, ὅτι οὐ διώρισται τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ οὐσίαν ἔχει αὐτὸ καὶ μετέχει αὐτοῦ.

And so he says that among existing things neither the first nor the last has need of action, the last because it does not directly attain the end, the first because it is not divided from the good but has it and shares in it in its own substance.<sup>2</sup>

Simplicius retains the vocabulary of his source but also introduces different meanings and words, even if that is not very important at this point.<sup>3</sup> Throughout his extensive commentary, one finds a genuine attempt of Simplicius to understand what he thinks to be the true doctrinal corpus of Aristotle, while he seeks to convey it into the conceptual apparatuses available to him. It should be noted that, apart from some synonymy between the two quotations above, the commentary of Simplicius underlines the inseparability between “the

2. Simp. *In Arist. De cael.* [ad II.12, 292b10] 485.11-16 Heiberg.

3. Cf. Pépin 1968: 49-50.

first” and “the good”, by virtue of the identification of their substances and their full mutual participation. The commentator goes further, and believes to identify an inaccuracy or at least a less precise phrasing in Aristotle:

καὶ εἴη ἂν τὸ μὲν ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῆς ὑπερουσίῃ λέγων ἀγαθότητος καὶ τοῦ ἑνός, τὸ δὲ μετέχειν ἐπὶ τοῦ νοῦ τοῦ προσεχῶς ἡνωμένου τῷ ἀγαθῷ καὶ μετέχοντος αὐτοῦ· τὸ μὲν γὰρ κατὰ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ τι προβεβλημένον οὐσίαν ἔχειν λέγεται, τὸ δὲ ἀπ’ ἄλλου λαμβάνον μετέχειν·

The word ‘has’ might be said of the hypersubstantial goodness and the One, and the word ‘shares’ of the intellect which is directly unified with the good and shares in it; for the One is said to ‘have’ in its own substance because it projects something, intellect is said to share because it receives from something else.<sup>4</sup>

The distinction is quite interesting. Simplicius suggests that “to have” is properly said of the relationship between the hypersubstantial<sup>5</sup> goodness and the One (since Plotinus, a name interchangeable with Good), this is to say, between one being and its own substance: in this case, between something (τι) that is beyond (ὑπέρ) being (οὐσία) and the beyond-being (ὑπερούσιος) of which that same something is; in other words, between transcendence itself and the transcended one. “To share” or “to participate” highlights a relationship with a different character, no longer under the sign of sameness, but between two different things, between one being and *another* being, between a postulate and a receptacle.

The Good (or hypersubstantial Goodness) is the supreme perfection among beings (and everything that is beyond them) and, as such, it is a maximally diffuser of itself – at this particular point we see how we are already a little distant from Aristotelian conceptual framework. In this sense, there is a close connection between the one

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4. Simp. *In Arist. De cael.* [ad II.12, 292b10] 485.16-19 Heiberg. Please note that, in Greek, “to have (ἔχειν)” and “to share” or “to participate (μετέχειν)” are two verbs with the same root and, as such, they are playing here a very interesting – and hardly translatable – game.
  5. This expression – Mueller’s and mine – translates here the word *ὑπερούσιος*, due to the impossibility of a less literal version with simultaneous faithfulness to the original text.

who *has* the good in itself and the one who tends towards it, who approaches it (as in the previous quotations) and who, the closer he is to the end to which he tends, the more he participates in it. The same is the case of the One, the highest holder of the Good, and of the intellect (or, in a hypostasis, of the Intellect) that participates in it; the intellect participates in something, and that something is that which *per se* does not participate (on the contrary, it solely has). It is, then, something that can be found, which *is* (considering, of course, this particular use of the verb “to be” as inappropriate) “beyond”.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. ARISTOTLE'S *ON PRAYER*

### 2.1. *The text of fr. 49 Rose<sup>3</sup> and its idiosyncrasies*

This is followed by the third part of Simplicius' commentary, the long-awaited return to Aristotle. First of all, my editing proposal of the fragment:

Aristotelis fragmentum XLIX *De precatatione sive De oratione*

Περὶ εὐχῆς α'

(Rose<sup>2</sup> 46; Rose<sup>3</sup> 49; Walzer 1; Ross 1; Gigon 67,1)

apud Simplicii *In Aristotelis De caelo commentaria* [ad II.12, 292b10]  
(*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* VII; p. 485.19-22 Heiberg)

<sup>19</sup> ὅτι γὰρ <sup>20</sup> ἐννοεῖ τι καὶ ὑπὲρ τὸν νοῦν καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης, δῆλός ἐστι <sup>21</sup> πρὸς τοῖς πέρασι τοῦ Περὶ εὐχῆς βιβλίου σαφῶς εἰπὼν ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἢ νοῦς <sup>22</sup> ἐστὶν ἢ <καὶ> ἐπέκεινά τι τοῦ νοῦ.

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6. Further we will see the challenges of this “beyond”; for now, see the Plotinian intertext in quest: Plot. I.7.1; V.5.10; VI.1.4; VI.1.8; VI.6.6; cf. Pépin 1968: 50 *passim*.

22 καὶ post Heiberg, Gigon, Pépin, Laurenti et mss. varia; om. D<sup>Fc</sup>, Heitz, Karsten, Rose, Ross<sup>7</sup>; itaque post testimonia varia versionis de Moerbeka (1540, 1544, 1548 et 1555): «Quod enim intelligat aliquid et supra intellectum et super substantiam Aristoteles manifestans est in calce libri De oratore plane dicens quod Deus aut intellectus est aut et aliquid ultra intellectum».

And now my proposal of an English translation:

That indeed Aristotle conceives of something also beyond intellect and being is clear, at the end of the book *On Prayer*, where he clearly says that “God is either intellect or something even beyond intellect”.<sup>8</sup>

Some clarification should be given about the text quoted above, since it had a rather eventful fate and suffered several textual losses. The earliest manuscripts available date from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and are thought to be part of two codicological families, whose two oldest extant specimens descend from the same lost archetype.

If this is a perfectly regular situation regarding the manuscripts, something completely abnormal happened in the *editio princeps* of the “Greek” text (1526). Heiberg – the author of the most “recent” edition (1894 and still in use) – discovered that the *editio princeps* is actually a Greek retroversion from the Latin translation of William of Moerbeke, which was, at the time of its respective *princeps* (1540), “corrected” in the light of that false original Greek text. The ques-

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7. Pépin (1968: 49, n. 2) admits that Ross omission of “καὶ” is an oversight, since he claims to quote Heiberg.
  8. Alternative translations: “That Aristotle has a conception of something above intellect and substance is clear at the end of the book on prayer where he says clearly that god is intellect or even something which transcends intellect.” (Mueller 2005); “That Aristotle conceives of something above thought and being is obvious from his saying clearly, towards the end of his book *On Prayer*, that god is either thought or something even beyond thought.” (Mayhew 2007); “That Aristotle has the notion of something above reason and being is shown by his saying clearly, at the end of his book *On Prayer*, that God is either reason or something even beyond reason.” (Ross 1952). Since this paper was funded by a Portuguese university and there is only one translation available in (European) Portuguese (Caeiro 2014), I will suggest also a new Portuguese translation: “Que, de facto, Aristóteles considera algo também para lá do intelecto e do ser, é evidente pelo fim do livro *Da Prece*, onde diz claramente que «Deus é ou intelecto ou até algo para lá do intelecto».”

tion – according to I. Mueller<sup>9</sup> – turns out to be even more extravagant, since Moerbeke translated from a manuscript older than those that still survive today and, moreover, considering that Robert Grosseteste also translated the second book of Simplicius' commentary (a translation whose material conditions still remain unknown), where the fragment of Aristotle was found. Evidently, in this case there are two – and not just one – critical editions to be prepared, starting with the editions of the extant Latin translations, so they can later help us clarify the Greek text, where there are plentiful *lectiones* but scarce certainties.

Although there are arguments standing for both sides about the authenticity of this Aristotelian fragment, the two catalogues of Diogenes Laertius (n. 14) and the Anonymous (n. 9) stand for its legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> It is also noteworthy the existence of a *vita* of Aristotle in Latin, dated from 1200, where there is a reference to this fragment, extending its interest far beyond the Neoplatonist influence.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2. *The structure and lexicon of the fragment*

Considering its structure, the fragment can be divided into four parts:

- (1) an initial explanative-descriptive proposition: “[...] Aristotle conceives of something also beyond intellect and being”;
- (2) the main proposition: “is clear, at the end of the book *On Prayer*”;
- (3) a locative assertion, which announces the quote: “where he clearly says”;

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9. Vd. Mueller 2005: 2-4 and 135-6; cf. Pépin 1968: 53, n. 6.

10. Edited, respectively, by Rose<sup>3</sup> and Düring; on the presence of this fragment on ancient catalogues, see Zanatta (2008: 345), Laurenti (1987: 706-7), Flashar (2006: 166) and especially Pépin (1968: 53, n. 1).

11. “fecit autem Aristotelis librum de oratione unde Simplicius ‘quod enim intelligat aliquid et supra intellectum et super substantiam Aristoteles manifestus est apud finem libri de oratione plane dicens quod deus aut intellectus est aut et aliquid ultra intellectum’” Düring 1957 *apud* Laurenti 1987: 706-7; cf. Zanatta 2008: 345.

- (4) a final declarative assertion (the quote from Aristotle): “that ‘God is either intellect or something even beyond intellect’”.

The fragment circulated during the Middle Ages without any doubts and, if there are no major reasons to suspect of its authority, the framework assigned to it may raise reservations regarding its authenticity. Parts (2) and (3) do not need much discussion: the first of them clearly mentions the title of the book and the location of the subsequent quote (πρὸς τοῖς πέρασι); the other part typically introduces a quote *ipsis verbis* (σαφῶς εἰπὼν), which justifies the insertion of the corresponding punctuation (quotation marks) in the translation. Part (1) has an introductory and explanative character of the enigmatic quote located in (4): God is either intellect or “even”<sup>12</sup> something beyond intellect, which – according to Simplicius (according to Aristotle) – informs us that “even” Aristotle mentions something that is “beyond” intellect and being and, as such, validates the admittance of the disjointed hypotheses.

The dictionary entries of ἐπέκεινα and ὑπέρ – both translated above as “beyond” – cover an overlapping semantic field, which explains the difficulties when trying to differentiate the two words.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that ἐπέκεινα immediately alludes to the famous description of the Good in the *Republic* of Plato;<sup>14</sup> on the other hand, ὑπέρ is a much complex case, since it contains in itself a myriad of meanings, of which three must be mentioned.

There is a locative meaning in ὑπέρ, which denotes to go beyond, to surpass a point, that could be translated as “supra something” or “above something”, but here this is not the case, unless one admits a metaphorical use of a locative framework in order to point out the speculated metaphysical realities. It follows the meaning that seeks to express a particular condition of excellency but, in this case, it does

12. The best codices read this “καὶ”, which is supported by the tradition of Latin translations (see above the critical apparatus); cf. Mayhew 2007: 297, n. 10.

13. I have discussed this topic in Castro 2016.

14. “Καὶ τοῖς γινώσκομένοις τοῖνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γινώσκεισθαι φάναι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ’ ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεῖα καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος.” Pl. *Resp.* 509b6-10 Burnet; see also Pl. *Phaed.* 112b and *Resp.* 587b.



not apply either, since in the Aristotelian system there can be no such thing that would be superior to rationality itself (whose apex evidently is the intellect). The meaning that both words have in this fragment of Aristotle is intensive and/or excessive, i.e. “beyond” the simple dimension of intellect and being, marking a difference in identity with these concepts, a break that implies a discontinuous perceptual and epistemological dimension, no longer within the framework of human understanding, but instead proper to a “God” (and we will see how this is important in prayer). Thus, the chosen translation for “beyond” is justifiable, since excess must always be “beyond” something, and only secondarily (and figuratively) could be described as “above” or “higher than”.

Something that *is* or is to be found “beyond” (ἐπέκεινα or ὑπέρ) establishes such a difference that it could be even characterized as an ontological and perceptual cut: to the subject thus described (“God”) it is no longer proper the distinction between intelligent and intelligible and, concerning the pair transcendent/immanent, only transcendence in its more radical sense could be admitted. The (dictionary) sense of ὑπέρ is so hyperbolic (forgive the repetition) that it could even mean a dissolution of dualism. This is why, in (typically Middle-) Neoplatonist philosophy, the formula ascribed to Aristotle – and with very noticeable evocations of Plato and an ancestral inheritance<sup>15</sup> – was mobilized to refer to the ultimate ascension towards God (here identified with the Good “beyond Intellect” and later, in another Neoplatonist synthesis, identified with the Christian God), after the ascension to the Intellect and to the Beautiful. A formula that would become the *leitmotiv* of a philosophical system.<sup>16</sup>

Much has been said about the disjunction “either ... or” (ἢ ... ἢ)

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15. “Die Geschichte der ἐπέκεινα-Formel ist vielschichtig; die Basis dieser Formel ist Platon, *Staat* VI, 509 a-b; sie ist immer wieder von Platonikern verwendet worden; möglicherweise schon vor Aristoteles *Περὶ εὐχῆς*.” Dörrie *apud* Whittaker 1969: 91, n. 1; cf. Flashar 2006: 167.
  16. “Καὶ γὰρ ὅτι <ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας>, ἐπέκεινα καὶ ἐνεργείας καὶ ἐπέκεινα νοῦ καὶ νοήσεως,” Plot. I.7.1.19-20 Henry-Schwyzler<sup>3</sup>; “Τὸ δὲ ἐπέκεινα τούτου τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ λέγομεν φύσιν προβεβλημένον τὸ καλὸν πρὸ αὐτῆς ἔχουσιν.” Plot. I.6.9.37-9 Henry-Schwyzler<sup>3</sup>; vd. e.g. Celsus *apud* Origenes, *Contra Celsum* VII 38.1 and 45.24-5; this is a topic with plenty of literature: cf. Whittaker 1969 and Kalligas 2014: 217 and 221.

and a number of strange misconceptions keep arising. In the scholarly literature, the question is to determine what the sense of the disjoints is: whether it is inclusive or exclusive. It is quite startling to see supporters of the inclusive reading, not only because that would not introduce any break, but also because of the surprise that causes to find Aristotle employing the Greek grammar with such creativity. In fact, this thesis was not sustained by J. Pépin – as some wrongly state – but by J. Bernays, with this latter author being quoted by the French in order to dismiss his thesis. What Pépin advocates is a reading in favour of a complementary precision by Aristotle, paraphrasing the “or ... even” as “more exactly” – a radical semantic change of a linguistic dispositive, which is quite counterintuitive –, arguing that the adding of καὶ (like in the best manuscripts) after the second ἢ attenuates the disjunction. However, I think Pépin was too optimistic when he thought that this reading would be enough to avoid the mutual exclusion of the hypotheses, so radical and necessary as critics recognise it.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3. *Hermeneutical challenges*

It is my belief that this is the main challenge of the treatise *On Prayer*. If we believe that Simplicius is quoting Aristotle word for word, *iisdem verbis*, then we must accept the rejection of the simultaneous possibility of something that coincides with the intellect and simultaneously is beyond intellect. That is to say, the last assertion of the fragment states that this God is either intellect or “even” something “beyond” this same intellect, in a disjunction of definitions such that – vehemently denying any violations of the *tertium non datur*

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17. “Dans la perspective de ces historiens [*scil.* Bernays *et al.*] en effet, à la première partie du texte d’Aristote (ὁ θεὸς ἢ νοῦς ἐστίν), la seconde (ἢ καὶ ἐπέκεινά τι τοῦ νοῦ) apporterait une précision complémentaire, que l’on peut par exemple introduire par « plus exactement » : « Dieu est intellect, plus exactement un intellect qui transcende celui de l’homme »; nulle rupture d’un membre à l’autre de la phrase, mais un développement, une progression, une continuité. Que l’on nous explique alors comment Aristote, pour rendre cette continuité, a justement choisi une tournure disjonctive (ἢ ... ἢ) dont le propre est d’exprimer la discontinuité !” Pépin 1968: 60; cf. *ibid.* 70; *sed contra* Laurenti 1987: 709-10, 715-6, 722 and Zanatta 2008: 350.

principle – the admissibility of one of these definitions rejects *ea ip-sa* – and because of that – the other hypothesis. If God is intellect, then there is no considerable difference with the intellect itself; if God is beyond intellect, if in its own way and *modus sui*, surpasses and transcends the ontological and perceptual domains of the intellect, it is a Levinasian *otherwise than being*, an unspeakable domain, which is powerlessly pointed out with resource to the word “beyond”, when the categories of thought are then exhausted and surpassed.

The understandable suspicion of inauthenticity that I mentioned results from this philosophical panorama apparently atypical in Aristotle. Of the alleged Neoplatonism of this fragment one can say “*se non è vero, è ben trovato*.”<sup>18</sup> If Aristotle was perhaps a little far from the contexts subsequent to his treatise, what would have been the subject of his treatise? Prayer, as an anthropological phenomenon transversal and virtually present in all cultures, certainly must have caused some interest on him. Since the most ancient lyrical compositions, poets and rhapsods have sung the alterity between gods and men – and a particularly noticeable thing is the difference between what a god allegedly knows or can do and what men are unaware of or what is beyond their control. In this context, prayer and divination would seek to partially bridge this mismatch between two distinct natures: to plead to be unveiled hidden mysteries or to be granted benefits – but the fragment, however, offers no elements pointing in this direction.

At a certain point of *On Interpretation* (Περὶ ἑρμηνείας, *De interpretatione*), Aristotle writes the following concerning prayer:

ἀποφαντικὸς δὲ οὐ πᾶς, ἀλλ' ἐν ᾧ τὸ ἀληθεύειν ἢ ψεύδεσθαι ὑπάρχει· οὐκ ἐν ἅπασι δὲ ὑπάρχει, οἷον ἡ εὐχὴ λόγος μὲν, ἀλλ' οὐτ' ἀληθὴς οὔτε ψευδής.

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18. One author wrote a small paper where he flatly rejects the authenticity of the fragment, based on the simplistic and imaginative idea that the title *περὶ εὐχῆς* would be a corruption of some *περὶ εὐτυχίας* (survived by the Latin title *De bona fortuna*), which would be a compilation of Aristotelian texts that was misinterpreted. (“A Greek text, including (but necessarily restricted to) *M.M.* 2.8 and *E.E.* 8.2 is compiled and originally entitled *περὶ εὐτυχίας*. It comes to contain, at some point, an unaristotelian phrase (absent from the original text of the *E.E.*, and based on a misinterpretation of that text) saying that God is “greater than Mind.” Rist 1985: 113.)

[...] not every sentence is a statement-making sentence, but only those in which there is truth or falsity. There is not truth or falsity in all sentences: a prayer is a sentence but is neither true nor false.<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle does not seem very interested in investigating prayer as something that can be judged according to its truth value, but rather as a form of expression, a way to convey certain things. If it is possible that Aristotle is not concerned with a speculation on the apophantic character of prayer, it is also true that the tradition read the fragment as having such subject matter, mainly due to its hint of a dissolution of rationality in the final moment of apophasis – i.e. once all the affirmations, negations, and negations of negations are exhausted, a celebration of ineffability and failure of language. But these are, once again, extrinsic philosophical instances.

The fragment XLIX occurs after an enquiry into how stars can be conceived “as enjoying action and life”.<sup>20</sup> Following the thread of the argumentation, there is a clear cosmological tone in the discourse and therefore, at the same time, the discourse is partly a theological one, inasmuch as it manifest the opposition between two natures: on the one hand, the divine nature and, on the other hand, that nature that is proper to certain beings who, like the stars, have an intelligible reality.

Noticeably different from the reading of Pépin, which sees the fragment as a *cosmic prayer*, M. Zanatta<sup>21</sup> advocates an interpretation of the fragment as having a religious character or, to be more precise, with a ritualistic character. It has already been seen that prayer has no direct epistemological character, as far as it does not allow the acquisition of knowledge of anything and does not produce nor formulate new science. In this sense, the Aristotelian prayer has no intent to plea or to be laudatory, and it is not a means to ask for something (to the unknown). It reveals, instead, a contrast between the cosmological-theological and the religious-ritualistic domains.

19. Arist. *De int.* 17a2-4 Minio-Paluello. Ackrill's translation. In this passage, the *Aristoteles latinus* records translations by Boethius and Moerbeke, and also a commentary by the first author, crucial for the joint reception with the *On Prayer*.

20. “δεῖ δ’ ὡς μετεχόντων ὑπολαμβάνειν πράξεως καὶ ζωῆς.” Arist. *De cael.* 292a20-1 Moraux.

21. Zanatta 2008: 351 *passim*; cf. Pépin 1968.

Not being in itself a rite, prayer appears in a ritualistic context, at least if we attend to the Greek culture, like the culture one may find in early depictions in the Homeric poems and broadly in the Greek religious phenomena, in which human existence is lived and gains meaning through participation in rituals and celebrations. Deities are expected to intervene in human affairs – not infrequently in Greek mythology, the outcomes of these interventions were not exactly good – and to answer the prayers addressed. This would be the case of an access within the sphere of *πάθος*, which would be a particular case of transcendence of the intellectual dimension.<sup>22</sup> But, as we have seen here, this is not the case.

We know that Aristotle wrote about a deity, but within a cosmological and metaphysical context, about a thinking reality with contemplative activity – considering its more excellent sense – which he famously defined through the formula *νόησις νοήσεως*. If the God of the fragment is this intelligence (here coextensive with the Plotinian Intellect), then – and accordingly with the Aristotelian fragment – it is senseless to admit a category such as the *relation*, insofar its autonomy, self-sufficiency and transcendence exclude any and all alterity; if God is “thought of thought”, self-contemplative thought, then all kinds of relation with any being other than himself are structurally excluded.<sup>23</sup> If it is authentic, what the available excerpt of the treatise *On Prayer* aims at are not the phenomena usually associated with prayer itself, nor it is a “cosmic prayer”, as Pénin understood it.

Nevertheless, the same French author raises with subtlety the possibility that this very fragment may appear as a prayer at the end of the treatise on the homonymous subject. An unusual prayer, purer and different, a prayer befitted for a philosopher. This is a rather original hypothesis that can provide a very ingenious explanation of the fragment in the line of the previous hermeneutical argumentation of this paper. Thus, we may suggest that, instead of a petition, this frag-

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22. “[...] è un Dio che tocca essenzialmente la sfera del *pathos* e, come tale, è «sopra» la dimensione intellettuale, nel senso di «al di là» di essa.” Zanatta 2008: 351.

23. Likewise, it is as a thinking being that man is more similar to God (“thought of thought”), which corroborates the superiority of the contemplative life. See, e.g., Arist. *EN* X.8.

ment could be a prayer that, appearing within a ritualistic context – following the same above-mentioned contexts –, would only point out the difference of its own nature with that of the intellect; or rather, something that would signal the epistemological break that the divinity *is* (considered solely within the religious context), through the terminologies and the ways of understanding the world proper to the philosophers. Not with rites but in his own context, the philosopher could also celebrate the divine, in his own way and with his proper means.

The fragment of the treatise *On Prayer*, even though if one believes in its authenticity, is too short and appears in a scarcely clarifying context. It is my belief that not much can be done besides scrutinizing its text and pushing the hermeneutic enterprise to the limits of the reasonable; that is to say, to investigate the meanings of its words and the framework that makes them meaningful. Substantial interpretations would require speculating “what Aristotle would have thought” about a given subject or attempting to reconstruct a historical-philosophical framework with plenty of gaps. Even with this seemingly adverse panorama and an aporetic ending, the interest of the fragment remains. Not only has it influenced a great number of late thinkers, but it also arouses curiosity today in those who are interested in a less widespread and yet undiscovered Aristotle.

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